

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided,²² and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

²³ The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. ²⁴ During the last watch of the night the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. ²⁵ He made the wheels of their chariots come off so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."

²⁶ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen." ²⁷ Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the LORD swept them into the sea. ²⁸ The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen—the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.

²⁹ But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. ³⁰ That day the LORD saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. ³¹ And when the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant. (Exodus 14:21-31)

What Does God See When He Looks Down Here?

Have you ever stood in a really high place and looked out? From the top of the Sears Tower in Chicago you can see for miles in every direction. How does that view compare to what you see when you're stuck in traffic at the bottom? In the car, you can see the buildings right around you. You can see the traffic that's making your life difficult and maybe you can glimpse inside store fronts and see faces of people on the sidewalk. But I think we'd all agree that you get a much better view of all that's happening from way up high. How much more could you see if you went even higher? What if you were in an airplane? What if you used a spy satellite in outer space? Sometimes, we picture God up in heaven looking down on us. The truth is, God is everywhere and sees everything from every perspective at the same time. He sees the view from the spy satellite and the view out the car window. But thinking of him as up there looking down helps us to think of him as having a clear view of us and our lives. On the day when we celebrate Jesus' ascension into heaven, it makes sense for us to ask, **what does God see when he looks down here?**

I.

Our Old Testament lesson for today uses that image of God looking down on us – not from heaven, but from the top of the pillar of cloud and fire that led the children of Israel out of Egypt. Of course, there is a sense in which that was literally true. The pillar of cloud and fire represented God's presence among his people so he really was on top of the pillar. But he is also everywhere all the time and God used this image of him looking down from the pillar in pretty much the same way we say that he's looking down from heaven. The important thing in Exodus – and in our lives – is that he does see us. **What does God see when he looks down here? He sees his people in need of help.**

That's what he saw in our reading. The people of Israel had been slaves in Egypt. God sent Moses to lead them to freedom. But Pharaoh refused to let them go, so God devastated Egypt with ten terrible plagues. Finally, the Egyptians drove them out. But once they were gone, the Egyptians realized someone had to do all the work that their slaves used to do. So the Egyptian army pursued them. God led them into what seemed like a trap: the Red Sea was on one side and the Egyptian army was on the other. That's when God acted. Moses stretched out his hand over the Red Sea and God sent a great wind that blew on the waters. It divided the waters so that there was a wall of water on either side of a path of dry ground. Now, obviously, this was a miracle. No wind we can imagine could do this. During the night, the Israelites escaped on this path through the seas.

But the Egyptians pursued them. That's when our text says that God looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud. He looked down and saw the Egyptian army pursuing. Now obviously, God had been watching all along and he saw his own people, too. But he underlines that he saw what the enemies were doing. And he

frustrated their efforts. He caused the wheels to fall off their chariots and he threw their army into confusion. The Egyptians finally realized that maybe it wasn't such a good idea to follow the Israelites down this path between two towering walls of water that God had made for Israel to escape. But it was too late. The waters flowed back to their place and wiped out the Egyptian army.

This is one of the most dramatic events in all of scripture. God did something that we will remember until Jesus comes back. What lesson does he want us to draw from it? God sees what is happening in our lives. When God sees our problems, he acts. Now, sometimes, he waits longer to solve them than we wish he would – the children of Israel were slaves for at least a generation before God rescued them. Who knows how many had to die in slavery? Who knows how much pain and sorrow they endured before he freed them? He worked on his timetable, not theirs. And the same is true for us. But he is always watching. Nothing that we suffer is hidden from his sight. All that he sees, he turns into blessing for us.

That's the tie-in to Jesus' Ascension. The night before he died, Jesus told his disciples that they weren't going to see him anymore. That has been true for two thousand years now. But he was not going to abandon them or us. He was ascending to the right hand of his Father. That is the position of power and authority. In Jesus' day, when a king gave a formal meal, the person who sat at his right hand was the most important guest there. Often it was the king's son and heir. It was someone who could exercise the king's own authority. Jesus has ascended into heaven to sit at the right hand of God the Father. There he rules all things for us. Nothing happens in this world that God does not use for the good of his Church. That includes painful things, just like it included slavery in Egypt.

What do we face here? The most obvious parallel is persecution, right? Today, it's hard to stand where God stands. It's hard to believe that our children are going to have an easier time of confessing their faith than we have had. But God sees what is happening. God sees how the devil is stirring up opposition to his people. God sees how the enemies of the faith rage against us. He will turn all their attacks into blessing for his Church. Finally, the hatred of the world is a sign of Jesus' return. It's part of how God will bring us home. And in this life, God will work for us. He sees the Church as a whole and he also sees each one of us individually. He knows how hard it is for us to stand. He turns every attack of the devil and his followers into blessing for us individual Christians.

But it isn't just persecution that God sees. He sees all that's hard and all that hurts. He sees the problems in our families and the failures in our church family. He sees the health issues and the financial issues and the struggles that come with them all. He sees the sleepless nights and the upset stomachs. He hears all our prayers for relief. And he will answer them all.

How do we know? Because Jesus ascended only after he died and rose. On the cross, he paid for all the sin of all the world. He paid for the sin that causes all our pain and sorrow here. He paid for your sins and my sins and took away God's need to punish each and every one of us. He paid because he loves us. He loves us still in all our hurt and sorrow. On the third day, he rose. He conquered death and hell. He defeated the devil and set us free even from our own sin. That means that finally, he has set us free from all that sin does to us. In heaven, in the resurrection, there will be no more hurt or sorrow. Between now and then, he rescues us from pain and distress again and again. When we have to wait for that rescue to come, he even uses that waiting for our good. Jesus who died and rose for us is now at the right hand of God, ruling all things for us. He sees everything in our lives when he looks down here.

II.

That reminds us of how God sees us: as people on a journey. This is not a real home. Our real home is heaven. **What does God see when he looks down here? He sees his people on their way home.** That's where the children of Israel were going. The Ten Plagues and the crossing of the Red Sea and even the forty years in the wilderness were stops along the way to the Promised Land. Like children whose parents take a new job in a different city, they were on their way to a home they had never seen, but their new home nonetheless.

Israel's deliverance from slavery in Egypt and journey home was a prophecy of Jesus freeing us from slavery to sin and taking us home. Right now, we are on the journey. Sometimes, it might feel like we've got the ocean behind us and the enemy in front of us with no way out – and that reminds us that only God can deliver us. It teaches us to trust him. Sometimes, it might feel like we're passing through the Red Sea – it's a miracle of God that we're alive. That reminds who our true Savior is. But every day that we are here, we are

on our way to our heavenly home. Some of us are maybe closer to the Promised Land than others. But Jesus could come back tomorrow and we would all arrive together!

Jesus went to heaven to prepare a place for us. Now, he's there, watching our lives, watching the challenges and the joys, waiting for the exact right moment to bring us home. So he works every day to make sure we stay on the path. Why did Israel have to wait so long to be freed? Because God had a plan to send a Savior through them. Israel marched up out of Egypt and crossed the Red Sea so that when the time was right, Jesus would be born from the tribe of Judah. We are all saved because God knew what he was doing when he made his plans. God still knows what he's doing. So as we struggle and pray and remind ourselves that he's watching, we also need to remind ourselves that he is working on his goal, not ours. Now, in love, he often lets us accomplish our goals at school at work, in our families, in our lives in general. But the true goal is heaven. Sometimes, to get there we really do have to pass through the desert. Why do we have to go that way? The answer is finally that God knows best how to bring us home. We trust our Savior to do that.

Part of that plan of bringing us home is the preaching of the gospel. Jesus told his disciples that repentance and the forgiveness of sins had to be preached to all nations. We are a part of that mission. The gospel has come to us and we are called to carry it into our community and the world. Sometimes we Christians suffer in one place so that the gospel can reach another. God has used persecution to cause Christians to carry the good news to places it had not reached yet. The Christian Church has enjoyed growth and prosperity here in America for over one hundred years because things were bad in Europe and other places, so our fathers came here.

God has a plan. When he looks down here, he's monitoring that plan. He make the subtle adjustments in our lives and in our world that will bring that plan to its fulfillment. You and I simply don't have the perspective to see all that he's doing. One day, we will. In heaven, we will see what God has been doing and we'll marvel at how it all fit together for our good. We will stand on top of the highest tower ever made and see it all. But today, we're still in the car and all we can see is the traffic jam around us. We can't even see what's causing it. Sometimes, we whine and complain about it. God sees that sin, too. But he doesn't lash out at us in anger. He gently calls us to repent and to trust him. To trust that Jesus has paid for and removed our lack of faith. To trust that that same Jesus will see all and do all to bring us home. That is a wonderful gift and promise. It's what Ascension teaches us. Amen.